

Encouraging learners to use English: Lessons from Trailer Park ESL
Florin M. Mihai, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA
Elizabeth Platt, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

The new immigrants: numbers and statistics

In the past decade, the United States has been experiencing an impressive wave of immigration. The latest US Census put the foreign-born population of the United States at 31.1 million, 57% more than the 1990 (NCELA Newslines Bulletin, 2005). Moreover, more recent estimates put the number of undocumented workers in the US anywhere between 8 and 12 million (Shuit, 2004). A large number of legal and illegal immigrants coming to the United States are adults who are past schooling age. Their English is often times limited or non-existent, thus restricting their access to what the US has to offer: a better education and a better quality of life. There are adult education programs that attempt to bring their English proficiency at a functional level, but, given the growing number of people who speak English as a second language, more needs to be done in the area of adult English language learners.

Trailer Park ESL Program

Our Trailer Park ESL Program attempted to fill this gap and concentrated on adult English learners who recently arrived in the United States.¹ The students participating in the program were, in a way, very typical: they spoke little or no English and had limited educational backgrounds. We never asked about their immigration status, but we suspected many of them crossed the border with the help of a ‘coyote’. Regarding the use of English, they were very reluctant to speak it, mostly because they have very limited language resources in the new language. Nonetheless, teachers (and students) in the program identified a need for promoting independent functioning in English. The

students wanted to become functional users of English as soon as possible so they can take advantage of better job opportunities, thus improving their living conditions.

Before talking about how the instructors conceptualized and operationalized this recognized need, a few words are in order about the participants and the nature of Trailer Park ESL Program. The students were Spanish-speaking migrants from Mexico, working construction jobs in north Florida. Their ages ranged from 17 to mid 40's; they have very different literacy levels and educational experiences. Two of the teachers, Elizabeth and Florin, held a PhD in ESL and were instructors at Florida State University in a program to prepare teachers who will work with English language learners; both also have taught various ESL and ESL-based courses. The third teacher, Blas, had earned an ESL certificate in the teacher preparation program. The classes were taught in a trailer home once a week, on Tuesdays from 8.30 to 9.30 p.m. The program continued for fourteen months by the end of which attendance had dwindled because of students' heavy work schedules. The classes and materials were free and concentrated on real-life, survival English, with an emphasis on tools, work at the construction sites, directions and maps, health issues, grocery shopping, job seeking skills, and emergency information.

Second language learning: teachers' beliefs and enactments

The three teachers who participated in the program had different views on what was the best way to learn English, and their activities and instruction clearly reflected their guiding philosophies regarding second language learning. These beliefs and enactments had an essential part in shaping what was independent functioning and how students should get there.

Florin

According to Florin language is learned in a social setting and the best and fastest way to learn English is to use English as much as possible. When he taught, he made sure that the native language of students, in this case Spanish, was used as little as possible. Students were allowed to make mistakes, but he always tried to control the task and provide scaffolding when needed. A typical Florin-directed task looked like this: at first, he gave a lot of directions and instructions on how to do the task in English only. The rationale behind it was he wanted to provide strategies for successful task completion in English. When the learners were doing the task, he would step out of the picture but would intervene when they were extensively using Spanish and not English for task completion. For Florin, the task had secondary importance, and it was only a means to extensive use of English by task participants.

Blas

According to Blas, language is best learned when content is related to real-life situations. He believed students needed a basic understanding of what they were going to learn. For Blas, students' native language, Spanish, was an important stepping-stone in learning English. If students struggled too much, they would become frustrated, shut down and stop learning. A typical Blas lesson looked very teacher-oriented. The students listened to Blas's explanations in English and Spanish and followed the lesson in a very linear fashion. They repeated words and responded to comprehension questions elicited by Blas. The students felt very comfortable because Blas was at all times in charge of where instruction was going and provided a ample language support in Spanish.

Elizabeth

According to Elizabeth, language is best learned in as natural and conversational way as possible. She allowed the use of students' native language, but emphasized the use of English for most instruction. She let students struggle a bit when they learned English, and assisted them through progressive steps. A task activity conducted by Elizabeth looked like this: at first, she explained the task in English, making sure the students understood it by providing lots of repetitions. Then, when the students were doing the task, her interventions were minimal and only when they needed help that was crucial for task completion, but not necessarily language-based, e.g. locating things on a map.

Teaching practices

In the area of language use, the three teachers involved held three distinct views: Blas had no reservations about using Spanish for instruction, explanation, and clarification. Elizabeth used English most of the time but did use Spanish when needed, while Florin used English only. In the area of error correction, the three teachers had three different approaches: Blas viewed uncorrected errors as unacceptable, Florin thought they were part of the learning process but feared if they were not addressed, they would become fossilized, whereas Elizabeth focused on meaning first and on errors later.

As mentioned before, the key need that the instructors wanted to address through Trailer Park ESL was independent functioning in English. As observed through teachers' beliefs and enactments, the three teachers had different visions on how the students should reach this level of functioning in English. In addition, when asked about his thoughts on the issue of independent functioning, the three instructors gave three different answers: Blas thought the students should be asked to perform at that level only

when they were ready, while Florin thought they could function independently at any level. They should struggle, but not for long, the teacher intervening whenever they reached a point where English was not used at all or when they had difficulty completing the task in English. Elizabeth also believed that the students should be encouraged to view themselves as independent users of English and that they need to struggle. When they struggle, teacher intervention should be minimal and students themselves should be the ones to solve their own difficulties, not their teacher.

Conclusion

Although frustrating at times due to limited attendance and hours, Trailer Park ESL proved to be a valuable experience for many of those involved, with impressive English language development validating the program's efforts. Through videotaping and observations, the teachers were able to examine their beliefs and reflect on their enactments of their teaching philosophies, as well as their teaching methods and strategies. However, what we realized was that a mismatch in philosophies among the teachers, or a contradiction between beliefs and enactments, could undermine the overall effectiveness of a program. Having examined our instruction throughout the program, we recognized this problem and attempted to come to greater consensus. Low skill, limited English proficient students with little time for instruction require our best efforts in this regard.

References

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Shuit, D.P. (2004). Reaching for shadow workers. *Workforce Management*, 83(2), 19-20.

¹ A paper presented at TESOL 2005 in San Antonio (Platt, Mihai, & Gomez, 2005) provided examples of instruction in the Trailer Park ESL program.